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Politicians with integrity in short supply

By Peter Delevett
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When U.S. Sen. John McCain sets his sights on you, it's best to pay attention.

The Arizona Republican has come out swinging against Silicon Valley. In a recent speech on the Senate floor, he blasted the likes of Yahoo, Oracle and Cisco Systems for using stock options to pump up earnings.

McCain isn't someone to take lightly. The maverick Republican often alienates his party's leaders, but his plain-spoken willingness to tackle tough issues helped him mount a credible run for president in 2000.

And though his proposed amendment to change the way options are handled was stymied by Senate Democrats, McCain often gets what he wants eventually -- whether it's normalization of relations with Vietnam, a crackdown on the tobacco industry or campaign finance reform.

"We're describing a man who will not quit," says former U.S. Rep. Tom Campbell, who himself earned a maverick reputation on Capitol Hill and who campaigned with McCain.

Campbell, who disagrees with McCain on stock options, nevertheless urges companies in his friend's cross hairs to "take Sen. McCain quite seriously."

Given the total lack of investor confidence in corporate accounting, a touch of McCain's integrity could be a welcome change.

Honda's hot seat

McCain's penchant for principled stands calls to mind another legislator, Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose.

Honda, who took Campbell's congressional seat, was one of just three members of Congress to vote against a recent resolution insisting that the phrase "under God" should remain in the Pledge of Allegiance.

A federal court in San Francisco had ruled the words unconstitutional. Another South Bay Congressman, Rep. Fortney "Pete" Stark, D-Fremont, joined Honda in dissent.

Honda says he was willing to cast that lonely vote because, having been sent with his family to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans in World War II, he's seen the dangers of knee-jerk patriotic fervor.

"I came to understand that because something's popular doesn't mean it's right," he says.

While admitting with a laugh that he didn't expect to be in such a tiny minority, Honda says the vote reflects his long-held views on the separation of church and state.

I happen to disagree with Honda: To me, the phrase ``under God'' doesn't denote any single deity.

But Honda, who is Christian, says Buddhist friends in San Jose have thanked him for his stand.

Honda was something of a reluctant congressman. He only agreed to run for the seat after then-President Clinton personally lobbied him.

Nobody would have been shocked had Honda gone with the crowd.

Instead, he and Stark have joined the ranks of people like Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland -- the only legislator to vote last fall against using force in Afghanistan.

Lee reportedly got death threats. Though Honda's gotten hundreds of messages -- most positive, he says -- nobody's threatened him.

Leaders wanted

The willingness of legislators like Honda, McCain and Lee to buck trends in pursuit of principle is refreshing -- and depressingly rare.

Contrast their high-mindedness to the petty political gamesmanship that gives voters a jaundiced view of democracy. Like the ousting of Assemblyman Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, from his committee chairmanship after he put heat on Gov. Gray Davis' administration for its handling of the state's multimillion-dollar contract with Oracle.

Or like the way San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales last month stuck it to Councilman Chuck Reed, a frequent critic of the mayor. Reed's district was the only one not to receive city funds for neighborhood projects.

High-school high jinks may be the law of the political jungle, but we deserve better from our elected officials.

Give us more McCains and Hondas.

Peter Delevett's column appears Sunday and Wednesday. If you've got a scoop, e-mail pdelevett@sjmercury.com or call (408) 271-3638. To subscribe to his e-mail dispatch, see www.peterdelevett.com.